

The New Jersey Shore...

'GAY DOWAGER'



N. N. APR 7 1957

Atlantic City, "Queen of the Coast," in holiday dress. Elaborate lighting display (above) along Boardwalk was pictured during one of the annual Christmas Carnivals while Easter airview (below) provides daytime contrast as holiday visitors thronged 'Walk. Absecon Light and Inlet may be seen in left background.



Promotion and Transportation Were Keys to Transformation of Atlantic City From Barren Wasteland Into 'Queen of Resorts'

By JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

"Call it a sand patch, a desolation, a mosquito territory, but do not talk to me about a city. You could not build a city there in the first place. And, if you did, you could not get anyone to go there."

LOGIC touched those words spoken in 1854 by a good, hard-headed Philadelphia businessman approached by promoters who schemed to build "a city by the sea." They proposed to call it "Atlantic City" or some such—and they sought to induce the Quaker City man to invest \$17.50 per acre of sand on a barren island.

Laugh not in hindsight at that care-

grown and no fresh water is naturally available. Visualize skyscraper hotels built on sand, amusement piers jutting into the ocean nearly a half mile, boards spread over a million square feet to keep restless feet out of the sand—and all of these where there is no steel, no lumber, no clay. Envision a city with 60,000 year-around residents in the most unlikely spot imaginable for a city.

That's Atlantic City.

TAKE this unlikely city and make it so elastic that it must absorb as many as a half million people every weekend in July or August—people who come or go without compulsion, and usually without advance notice, lured

This is the seventh of a series of articles on the New Jersey Shore. In the next installment, the writer will consider the string of narrow islands known as the "Jersey Keys" set off from the mainland of Cape May County by lagoons, canals and marshes.

ful gentleman from Philadelphia—he merely tried to be logical about Atlantic City. The surest way to be confounded by Atlantic City always has been to view it as something logical, something to fit the ordinary pattern of things.

Apply common sense to Atlantic City—as it already exists—then spare the Philadelphian of a century ago.

Vision a city on a sand bar four miles at sea, where nothing can be

by hot sun or repelled by cool rain. The city must be prepared to feed, house, amuse, doctor and pamper these people on cue.

Enough of logic or illogic, whatever this be. Atlantic City for 75 years has been America's best-known resort. Today her 13 to 15 million annual visitors come from far and wide; it is safe to say that practically everyone in the country has been in Atlantic City or

(Continued on Following Page)



Atlantic City's mammoth Convention Hall can accommodate more people than live in Asbury Park and Long Branch combined.

RESORT 'QUEEN'

(Continued From Preceding Page)

knows personally someone who has been there.

Atlantic City's shimmering glory reaches its peak in July and August, as all resort towns, but her strength has been the ability to keep people coming around the calendar. This is much more remarkable than attracting millions of people when cool breezes and sparkling ocean offer relief from the oppressiveness of hot inland city pavements.

A recent study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia disclosed a startling fact: Seventy-five per cent of Atlantic City's annual 700 to 800-million-dollar business is transacted in the "off" months from September to June. That's contrary to all resort rules.

ATLANTIC CITY'S off-season success lies largely in its ability to cater to the American propensity for encouraging birds of like feather to convention together. Sooner or later every organization chooses Atlantic City for its convention—one out of every five conventions held in America gathers on THE Boardwalk.

Week in and week out they convene — doctors, lawyers, bankers, teachers, plumbers, industrialists, labor leaders, and a thousand and one other varieties of men and women who meet to exchange ideas and to hear new developments. They come because the city's 300 to 400 hotels (some with as many as 1,000 rooms, some merely overgrown tourist homes) can house them, because the city's 500 restaurants can feed them, and because the gigantic Convention Hall can accommodate more people than live permanently in Asbury Park and Long Branch put together.

Rumor persists that some conven-

tioners, particularly males flocking together, need more than dull old meetings and dull new ideas to entice them back year after year. If so, Atlantic City makes no bones about supplying amusement to meet virtually any tourist or convention demand, tailored to fit virtually any wallet. A writer for the "American Guide Series" summed it up about as well as it can be done:

"Atlantic City is an amusement factory, operated on the straight-line, mass production pattern. The belt is the Boardwalk along which each specialist adds his bit to assemble the finished product—the departing visitor—sated, tanned and bedecked with souvenirs."

Two things—transportation and promotion—transformed Atlantic City from a barren island wasteland to what she is today.

FIRST and foremost came transportation. Cape May and Long Branch had been beloved resorts for Philadelphia a full half-century before a small group of enthusiasts led by Dr. Jonathan Pitney decided in about 1850 that Absecon Island could find favor in the Quaker City. In 1853 they took the wraps off a fanciful paper city, called in big gold letters: "ATLANTIC CITY."

Dr. Pitney and his vision-filled friends applied to the New Jersey Legislature for a charter to build a railroad, an undertaking deemed so ludicrous that the Camden & Amboy Railroad's powerful lobby let the Legislature grant the request. Who wanted a railroad: the fishermen, the glass-blowers in the pines, the bay boatmen? Let Pitney and friends build; let them perish by the sea.

They built, over the rivers and through the woods and across the bay, and on July 1, 1854, a Camden & Atlantic Railroad train rolled across the

South Jersey flatlands from Camden to Atlantic City in 2½ hours. Aboard rode 600 dignitaries, and, of course, the Press. Never has the "fourth estate" been very far from Atlantic City's heart or mind.

OTHER capitalists, reassured by the success of the "impossible" city, built the Narrow Gauge Railroad (so called because of its narrow width) from Camden to Atlantic City in 1877. They were astoundingly eager for the business—they laid 54 miles of track in the phenomenal time of 98 days. Then they cut fares and warred with the Camden & Atlantic for business. The city boomed.

Atlantic City couldn't be disputed in its 1900 claim that no seashore resort in all the world matched its glories. In less than 50 years the population of the island wasteland had soared from about 100 hardy beach squatters to about 28,000 full-time residents. Its real estate values—close to worthless in 1854—zoomed to more than 50 million dollars in 1900.

Seven hundred thousand people reveled in the joys of Atlantic City in 1900, and seemingly they couldn't wait to get there. In 1898 the Atlantic City Flyer thundered across the pine barrens between Camden and the shore in 44 minutes for the 55½ miles—74.4 miles per hour. Regularly, a patron could make the trip in 50 minutes.

The passion for speed reached its peak in 1920, just as the automobile crippled railroad travel. That year a survey showed that of the 16 fastest trains in the world 13 were in the Atlantic City service.

FAST trains to Atlantic City coupled with a \$1 round trip fare created the "day tripper," and it's unquestionable that the "Dollar Excursionist" gave the city its wide appeal. Throughout the 1890s and up until World War I

working men found freedom to play only on Sundays. That day, week in and week out, found swaying Atlantic City-bound coaches teeming with Philadelphia families, laden with their "shoe box lunches."

Naturally not all of Atlantic City viewed the "Shoe Box Lunch Set" with favor. Keepers of the swank hotels figured anyone who couldn't come for at least a week should stay home and get rested for his job. Hotel residents probably viewed the masses with alarm, too; in those days Atlantic City's "regulars" considered themselves genteely upper class.

The railroads didn't care: an excursionist's dollar looked the same as a millionaire's dollar. Keepers of the Boardwalk (the capital "B" has been correct since 1896) didn't care either. As a matter of fact, they loved the excursionists. The love was mutual.

Railroads brought millions to Atlantic City faster than many of them could get to their jobs during the week. The city, led by its hotel keepers, firmly decided that prosperity lay in spreading the magic name throughout the land—throughout the world, in case any Hindus or Egyptians or Mongols might be planning a world tour.

PROMOTION reached high peaks in Atlantic City long before the grandfathers of today's Madison Ave. hucksters even discovered the word colossal. Dr. Pitney and associates boasted about the attractions of their shore (candidly hopeful that their \$17.50 land might one day be worth \$500 per acre). Hotelkeepers in 1900 raised \$16,000 for advertisements in 60 newspapers in 20 cities and that year opened a year-around information bureau in New York City—with part-time offices in Chicago, St. Louis, Toronto and Montreal.

One bit of promotion caught hold



RIGHT: World War I memorial at traffic circle, where Ventnor (left) and Atlantic Aves. meet, also marks eastern terminus of coast-to-coast U.S. 40 (upper leg). Thoroughfare is Albany Ave., an extension of Pleasantville Blvd. Atlantic City High School is in left foreground.



in Margate City, "Lucy" (left), wooden elephant built in 1882, provides one

of shore's surprising sights. Homes (above) remind one of Deal and Elberon.

and became a major tradition. Word of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 caused some hustlers in Atlantic City to suggest an Easter parade in the resort town on Easter Sunday. "Maybe," they reasoned, "some of the swells down to Philadelphia for the Exposition will come over."

Not many arrived on the 1876 Easter special trains, but in 1896 nearly 40,000 folks strolled the Boardwalk to show their finery on a cool Easter Day. By leaving off their coats, though, "bright and chipper Easter girls and many fashionably attired young men . . . made themselves believe it was a balmy day." That could have been written about this year or any of the years since 1896.

Atlantic City made the beautiful girl its symbol, and with its mimeograph machines created the legend that every American female is shaped in a mold marked 36-24-36, give or take an inch. Promoters have put as many young women as possible into

bathing suits and paraded them before judges to prove the figures.

MISS AMERICA rules supreme as the queen of American beauty, just as she has ever since the first of her royal family was discovered in Atlantic City in 1921. She also rules supreme as the top American promotional device; she has been imitated everywhere. Today, of course, Miss A. is chosen merely to prove that talent is not dead. The fact that the hotels and the Boardwalk get an extra week's business is merely a pleasant coincidence.

Atlantic City has been called many things (with views of visiting journalists sometimes disagreeing with typewriters in the city's publicity office). However, ever since the old resort paused in 1954 to celebrate her 100th anniversary, the term "Gay Dowager" creeps into an occasional official press release.

"Gay Dowager"—that's good. That's a way of saying that practically nothing

under the Atlantic City sun is new—but that an annual spring repolishing hides the wrinkles and the gray hair and makes the old girl practically as chipper as a campus widow.

What really is new at Atlantic City?

THE BOARDWALK? Not a bit of it—the present Boardwalk dates from 1896, allowing for a widening to 60 feet in 1902 and for the annual \$100,000 refurbishing. The present Boardwalk is old, but at that it is only the fifth in a line dating from 1870.

Atlantic City takes credit for inventing the Boardwalk, citing Alex Boardman, railroad conductor, and Jacob Keim, hotel keeper, as the discoverers. It seems that Boardman didn't care for sand in his cars any more than Keim liked sand on his hotel carpets—so the pair persuaded the city to lay a plank walk on the sand in 1870.

The resort's rise dates from its first seaside promenade, and to this day

Atlantic City's charm radiates around that wooden pathway. There is nothing like it on the face of the earth, and—even though shops may be featuring Elvis Presley buttons and 'Walk theaters may be showing the latest Hollywood smashes—the Boardwalk's appeals are old, old stuff.

Take the amusement piers. They seem in scope like something perfected this morning. They aren't; father and grandfather and great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather enjoyed Atlantic City's ocean piers.

THE first of the piers stretched out over the Atlantic Ocean in 1882; the newest of the lot came into being in 1913. None is as much a magnet as the great Steel Pier, with its incredible variety of amusement, but that dates all the way back to 1898. Possibly no single amusement enterprise in any corner of the globe has been as widely advertised as the Steel Pier;

(Continued on Following Page)

RESORT 'QUEEN'

(Continued From Preceding Page)

probably no other single spot has featured as many varying stars of show business.

Boardwalk amusements and Boardwalk shops, webbed together by year-around hotels—that's the modern Atlantic City. This year-around matter, too, is a story out of the past. Why the Brighton Hotel, first to try it, stayed open the year-around as early as 1876!

The city claims 300 to 400 hotels and at times has gotten quite indignant when writers for national magazines have questioned whether some of the vintage wooden buildings back from the Boardwalk are really hotels. Everything's up-to-date in Atlantic City, the city thinks, as it publicly views all hotels as being the same as the fabulous structures close by the ocean waves. Privately, many a progressive city booster recognizes that many of the old relics must go—to make room for motels.

Even the magnificent 'Walk hotels—and magnificent is a reasonably fair word—aren't new, unless 30 years old can be considered juvenile. All of the Boardwalk hotels date from a splurge of frenzied building between 1900 and 1929, and many of them are old names going back to the turn of century, the brick skyscrapers retaining the titles of old wooden hotels they replaced.

For the hotels and amusements and promotion, Atlantic City's real attraction is its beach—in its organization and its safety one of the wonders of the modern resort world.

Each year as many as 10 million people go down to the sea in bathing suits at Atlantic City. Often 200,000 people—half the population of Newark—swim on a Saturday or a Sunday. Just the immensity of these masses would make it seem inevitable that a few would be lost, stomped down to the ocean's bottom to perish. That makes the record of Atlantic City's Beach Patrol far more than laudable; it's fantastic.

The city hired its first paid lifeguards in 1892. Before that volunteer guards patrolled the beach, passing the hat after a rescue—and sometimes doing right well. One of them, Henry Rutter Jr., dived into the surf one day and hauled out Jacob Whiting of Philadelphia. That was a big one for Henry; Mr. Whiting was wealthy and he reckoned his life to be worth \$500. Henry took the money, established a bath house business which by 1907 brought an offer of \$100,000.

Records carefully kept by the Beach Patrol starting in 1913 show some astounding facts. Since 1913 the patrol has rescued nearly 60,000 persons—with well under an average of only one drowning per year. Less than ONE drowning a year, out of 10 million people who enter the ocean. Some of the millions really try their darnedest to drown; the Beach Patrol rescues fool and unfortunate with commendable impartiality.

No one knows for sure how many people have ridden out to Absecon

Island by train or by wagon or by automobile since 1854. Surely the number from the time Absecon Boulevard was finished in 1919 approaches the half billion mark. Probably a billion people is not too high a total of visitors over a full century of time.

NOT all of those billion or so humans are Boardwalkers. Some, believe it or not, actually move right through Atlantic City, turning north to Brigantine or south to Ventnor, Margate City and Longport. The last three share Absecon (Absegami) Island with Atlantic City; Brigantine has an island of its own, but for all purposes is a suburb of Atlantic City.

Brigantine is a puzzle. The island is desirable, the location is good, the proximity to the "Queen of Resorts" would seem to make it a natural spot for development. Yet, until the last decade, Brigantine knew only failure—cursed, legend says, by the brigantine cast on its beach in the early 18th Century. The sea-tossed ship gave the island a name but, as the legend says, it forewarned disaster.

Many have tried to cope with Brigantine. In the 1880s the Philadelphia's Republican overlords, Matt Quay and Boies Penrose, gathered their GOP cronies at Brigantine to determine what Pennsylvanians (and Americans in general) should have in the way of government. Quay encouraged developers to build a railroad trestle across the bay in 1890, to construct hotels and to lay a trolley line over the sand.

A STORM tore down the railroad bridge in 1903, the trolley gave up the ghost soon after and the hotels stood vacant. By 1914 only 15 people voted in Brigantine. Periodically waves of real estate speculation dashed over the island—in 1914 and again in the 1920s, when a huge development program featured by a \$1,250,000 hotel founded in the 1929 Wall Street tidal wave. A \$5,000,000 housing program started in

1947 has brought Brigantine along, but it is unlikely to grab the headlines away from its flamboyant big sister across the inlet.

The first railroad entered Atlantic City at what is now the northern part of the city—North Carolina Ave. It turned south and moved all the way down the island to Longport in the early 1880s. Alongside its steel right-of-way Ventnor, Margate City and Longport sprang into being. The names suggest their origins as real estate promotions—the first two were borrowed from England while the third was named for the original owner, James Long.

Longport and Margate City started at about the same time in 1882. The Longport promoters ran a special excursion train from Philadelphia that year and hauled prospective customers down to their sand dunes in fine carriages. Lots sold, particularly to Philadelphians interested in nature—who joined the Agassiz Association for "the pleasure and benefits derived from the study of the animal and vegetable life of the sea and the wild flowers of the shore."

Up island a stretch, James V. Laferty entertained the notion that novelty rather than nature would entice prospective lot purchasers. In 1882 he built Lucy, the wooden elephant which still towers over Margate's boardwalk. Lucy cost \$38,000 for the lumber for her wooden innards and the sheet metal for her hide. Her measurements are 45-38-80—45 feet high, 38 feet long and 80 feet around the waist. She's no beauty queen, but she's one of the most surprising New Jersey Shore sights.

VENTNOR, nearest neighbor of Atlantic City, very likely would be part of that city except that in the early days a narrow inlet stretched across Absecon Island. It eventually became "Dry Inlet" and is today Jackson Ave. The wife of the secretary-treasurer of

the land development company chose the name: Ventnor, after a seaside resort she knew on the English Isle of Wight.

All of Atlantic City's southern neighbors have boardwalks and hotels and modified amusements, but they have developed as suburban resort areas rather than in the manner of their much more noted neighbor. Many of their homes are large and spacious, somewhat reminiscent of Deal and Elberon.

Back in 1929 Atlantic City politicians politely—if over ardently—suggested that Ventnor and Margate City come into the family as legal portions of the city. Both refused, with vehement impoliteness, aware that their charms for Atlantic City consisted mainly of multi-millions of dollars in ratables.

Atlantic's City financial collapse after the crash of 1929 points up the paradox of many a resort—a gold-planked boardwalk doesn't necessarily mean prosperity for the city which plays host. Atlantic City suffered badly; former banks became marble and stone night clubs after the 1929 collapse. There was ample justification for believing that the politicians used Atlantic City—but good—and left the "Queen" gasping for breath in the depression.

THE city came back. During World War II Atlantic City performed rather nobly as a center for training troops and for receiving the wounded and weary military men from the world's battlefronts. Giant hotels became luxurious barracks and fine hospitals. World War II may well have been Atlantic City's shining hour; a lady in need often is better than a lady in spangles and sequins.

These days Atlantic City is handsome (near the Boardwalk) and affable and charming—the year-around. In November 20,000 to 30,000 New Jersey teachers crowd its hotels for their convention. In December the city and its neighbors sparkle with a splendid Christmas glow. The New Year holiday attracts 50,000 or more people—a good mid-July crowd for most resorts. Huge crowds jam the Boardwalk when Washington's Birthday falls on a weekend. Easter Sunday finds the planks echoing to the tap of new high heels.

All year long the show goes on—for conventions, for reunions, for holidays, Atlantic City stays alive. Regardless of varying opinions about the "Queen," she is remarkable. She loves people, she loves to welcome them, to entertain them, to send them home eager to return. She can take state and national off-season investigations of alleged gambling and vice with a yawn, secure that scarcely a devoted lover will think one bit less of her, come warm weather.

She is exciting, she is fabulous, she is warm-hearted. She makes a man spend a bankroll without a murmur, regardless of what regrets he might have when he get home. She is nice to children, hints at excitement for their parents. She sparkles, she fascinates, she warms. You've got to like the "Gay Dowager"; she gives you a run for your money.



Brigantine Hotel, erected in 1920s, was a U.S. Naval training facility in World War II. Resort is north of Atlantic City.